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HAND-ME-DOWN SCOOP

ON FEBRUARY 13 *New York Times* reporter Leslie Gelb reported that the United States had contingency plans to place nuclear depth bombs (like anti-submarine depth charges, only nuclear) in Canada, Iceland, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico and that these countries were upset at the prospect—particularly as they had never been consulted by the United States. Gelb's story was particularly infuriating to the Reagan administration not only because the *Times* spurned Secretary of State George Shultz's personal request not to run the story, but also because Gelb was the director of the State Department's Bureau of Political Military Affairs during the Carter administration. Gelb's successor, Lt. Gen. John Chain, retaliated by ordering his staff not to talk to Gelb anymore and by removing Gelb's photograph from display in the State Department.

Chain was courteous enough to provide a public explanation for his actions. He put a little notice in place of Gelb's photograph, inscribed in beautiful copperplate handwriting, that read: "Removed For Cause. The P. M. Director, 1977 to 1979, did willingly, willfully, and knowingly publish, in 1985, classified information the release of which is harmful and damaging to the country." (Last week, after taking much abuse in the press, Chain restored Gelb to the good graces of the State Department. Gelb's picture, though, remains in storage.)

A lively debate has since ensued over whether disclosing contingency plans to put nuclear depth bombs on distant islands was in fact telling the Russians something new, and whether the countries involved had good reason to be taking umbrage. It seems to me, however, that General Chain has inadvertently raised important questions, not about the smaller details of nuclear war plans, but about the practice of journalism in America.

FIRST, WHY IS someone whose picture was hanging on a State Department wall working for *The New York Times*? The *Times*'s policy that government experience such as Gelb's can only enrich a reporter's understanding of the issues has already backfired once in the previous year. Last summer the *Post* scooped the *Times* by reporting that Carter administration officials, including Gelb, had prepared a memorandum in 1978 titled "Covert Action to Counter Anti-Neutron Bomb Forum." Gelb, of course, couldn't report the story because the memo is still classified. Two days later, the *Times* ran a lame follow-up story in which Gelb was interviewed by one of his colleagues.

The story reported Gelb as saying "he did not know then, and does not know now, whether any covert effort was actually approved and carried out."

Second, and more important, did General Chain's heavy-handed interior decorating disclose, as *Times* editor A.M. Rosenthal asserted, "a lack of understanding of a free press and an astounding distortion of the facts"? General Chain surely knew, said Rosenthal, that "the story *The New York Times* published contained no information that had not already been published and debated in the countries named in the story. The only people from whom this information had been withheld were the American people."

Withheld? By whom? It is true that the story had already appeared in a multitude of newspapers outside the United States. But it was, in fact, the American media itself that "withheld" the story by showing a marked reluctance to have anything to do with it.

The main source for Gelb's article was William Arkin, a 28-year-old former Army intelligence analyst who in 1982 wrote a book with me on nuclear war plans. Arkin is now nuclear weapons researcher at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. Last year Arkin obtained a nine-year-old secret document relating to the Pentagon's Nuclear Weapons Deployment Plan—a classified memorandum, approved each year by the president, authorizing the deployment of nuclear weapons outside the United States. The document listed eight U.S. bases in the Azores, Bermuda, Canada, Iceland, the Philippines, Spain, Diego Garcia, and Puerto Rico, where the Pentagon had contingency plans to send, or maybe even had sent (no one knows because the Pentagon won't talk about it), B-57 nuclear depth bombs, each nearly the size of the Hiroshima bomb. Arkin tried to interest *Washington Post* reporter Walter Pincus in the document.

Pincus said later that he was skeptical about the newsworthiness of the deployment plan. He didn't think the depth bombs would be used in a nuclear war because they would blow out important underwater sensors used for tracking submarines. "I don't think the [depth bomb] plan is relevant to nuclear war; it's an interesting footnote," said Pincus.

Pincus has a point. If the idea is to deploy these weapons in a superpower crisis, one would imagine they are low down on the list of priorities. But Arkin argues that it is just these kind of tactical, rather than strategic, nuclear weapons that could be the first to be used by a president who has decided to cross the nuclear threshold. The policy behind the contingency planning is therefore of great import and should be a matter of public debate. Nevertheless, Pincus declined to write an article on the document.

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In December Arkin was invited to give a lecture in Iceland, where nuclear issues are a constant source of political tension and debate. Iceland is an active member of NATO and hosts a large U.S. base at Keflavík. But Iceland, by agreement with the United States, does not allow nuclear weapons on its territory. Arkin met with Iceland's prime minister, Steingrímur Hermannsson, and told him of the U.S. plans to deploy 48 nuclear depth bombs at Keflavík in what appeared to be a clear breach of the "non-nuclear" agreement between the two countries. Next day, reports of the meeting were splashed all over the Icelandic papers. Other reports went out on Swedish radio and, as usual, a translation of the item was made by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service and copies put into the State Department's press room. Nothing appeared in the American media.

IN THE BEGINNING of January, Arkin told me that Bermuda was on the list. Impressed by the absurdity of nuclear weapons on Britain's holiday island in the sun, I wrote a story for *The Observer* in London. In passing, I mentioned the names of other countries on the "depth bomb" list. *The Observer* considered it of mild interest, placing it in a single column in the middle of page six.

Next day a reporter from the *Royal Gazette* in Bermuda picked up *The Observer* story and splashed it on the front page with a comment from Premier John Swan, saying he knew nothing of the plans. He might not have known, of course, because Bermuda's security is in the hands of its colonial masters, Britain. The Bermudians took umbrage anyway. The *Royal Gazette* warned President Reagan that he "should be careful to preserve Bermuda's goodwill."

The *Royal Gazette* reporter happened to be a stringer for the Canadian press and he passed on the information that Canada was on the list. For the next two weeks the Canadian papers were full of Arkin and his discovery. The chief of Canada's defense staff, General Gerard Theriault, confirmed the existence of the U.S. plan on January 10.

Finally, on February 1, the *Times* reporter in Ottawa, Christopher Wren, mentioned the row in Canada as a footnote to a story about Canadian reaction to Star Wars. The next week Arkin met with Gelb and gave him a copy

of the once-secret plan. The *Times* finally ran the story on page one a week later.

Poor General Chain. His excuse for removing Gelb's picture is not worth an empty picture frame. And what will undoubtedly make matters worse, as everyone in journalism knows, is that a banned or barred reporter quickly becomes the favorite of "leakers" inside the bureaucracy who are encouraged to whisper their secrets over the phone or mail classified documents in unmarked envelopes. Watch for more scoops from the Gelb key-board—as long as they don't involve him personally, of course.

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